

The last word Left cultural work

by the Editors

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Left cultural work at present in the United States contains awkward, and sometimes paradoxical contradictions. We often find evidence of these in JUMP CUT itself. As editors we're sometimes painfully aware of them, especially when we run into the two most common reactions to an unresolved contradiction. On the one hand, some people react with a simplistic and dogmatic purism; they demand that one be totally for or against semiology, Lina Wertmüller, cinema vérité, or whatever. On the other hand, some offer as a solution to real contradictions a mushy liberal relativism; they stand for a meaningless pluralism promoting anything.

Neither purism nor relativism can help us resolve the genuine problem of trying to combine left politics and cultural work. This is something we all face, whatever our specific activities—filmmaking, writing, teaching, studying, using film in direct political work, and so forth. In an earlier editorial (JC 3), we discussed the ways that radical filmmaking can combine political and cultural activity. Here, in an extension of our last few editorials and as a preface to forthcoming ones, we want to lay out some basic positions on left cultural work.

Cultural work is vitally important to the left movement as a whole, is politically valid, and cannot be postponed. The Vietnamese provide us with the most striking recent example of art and cultural work fully integrated with revolutionary struggle, and history provides us with many similar examples. Revolution is a totality, a process that involves transforming all of society, and art is an active part of that transformation.

There is a second, equally important, aspect we must keep in mind: although cultural work is necessary, it is not sufficient to make the revolution. Intellectuals find it tempting to give culture a primary

position in effecting social and political change, but such a false hope reflects only the thinker's class position. Often, reacting against those on the left who liquidate the question of culture by ignoring, dismissing, or postponing it, left intellectuals may attempt to posit a cultural revolution that will bring about the political revolution. This view is attractive because it seems so neat and painless: produce art, change consciousness. And when we've changed enough consciousness — presto, the revolution. But at heart this view too denies the totality and process of revolution. It divides culture and politics and chooses the former. Art in and of itself, revolutionary culture in and of itself, cannot do the two most important things defining a revolution: assume state power and take control of the means of production. The assumption that culture suffices to make the revolution rests on a false view of revolution itself.

We can no more accept radical culture as self-sufficient than we can accept other aspects of left work as self-sufficient: trade union work, community organizing, electoral and governmental struggle, insurrectionary activity. All of these—culture included—contribute to the revolutionary movement. At any one moment, in a certain context and under specific conditions, any one of them may assume primary importance. You wouldn't show a movie when people were erecting barricades outside the theatre. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be making and showing films.

The extremes in the way people on the left today view the importance and role of cultural work in part derive from extremes within the left discussion of art historically. On the one hand, a left utilitarian position was most articulately expressed by Mao Tse-tung in his 1942 Yenan Forum talks. Mao grants art great power to affect people—it really makes a profound political difference. And he emphasizes the subsequent clear-cut need to subordinate art to immediate political priorities. On the other hand, an extreme “aesthetic” position on the left is represented most clearly by Trotsky's writings on art. He finds art basically incapable of affecting reality and therefore grants art considerable autonomy.

In short, the extremes have been posed in these terms: If art can affect people, then all art and artists must be completely dominated by immediate political needs. But if art cannot affect people, then it and artists are essentially irrelevant. Both these extremes represent views coming from the midst of revolutionary struggles. They reflect extreme situations. We feel closer to Mao on this subject. We think that in our media society all kinds of art, especially mass culture, have a great effect on people. For this reason we think that art has great political importance and therefore should be subjected to political analysis and, in a revolutionary situation, to political control. Culture is not neutral. But the exact relationship between intellectuals and mass struggles,

between artists and the current political movement, between culture and politics—especially in the absence of a revolutionary political party—is not an easy problem to solve.

Of course, the existence of a revolutionary party in the United States with deep roots in the working class would help resolve the problem of the role and function of art and cultural work, of how to integrate art and politics, of how to serve the needs of the people. Such a party would raise contradictions to the level of conscious analysis and discussion. It would make principled decisions democratically, within a specific historical situation—a situation which itself changes and evolves, creating new contradictions and demanding new analysis and discussion. It would be able to deal with the practical need for a division of labor in the revolutionary movement and the political need for bringing together intellectual and worker, petty-bourgeoisie and working class, cultural worker and political organizer in common struggle.

Unfortunately, we don't have such a party, and it doesn't look as though one is going to materialize very soon. In the absence of a clearly leading party or even a clear mass movement as in the 60s, we are left without coordinating leadership and common aims. Thus at present, culture and politics become separated too easily. One “does” culture, or one “does” politics. There is no easy way of saying both at once, and people doing both (at once, simultaneously, or alternately) often find themselves in a middle position, being sniped at from both cultural and political sides. But this reality should not lead us to despair of any solution. Instead, it should serve as a starting point for our work. The integration of culture and politics, of the artist and the movement, is not easy, but we can and must take the initiative in the struggle against capitalism now. We need to maintain an open dialogue among left cultural workers in order to provide the support and criticism needed for growth.

In addition, we need to consider our activity in light of the main danger of our position as cultural workers, as intellectuals, as an educated elite. Our practice must help us struggle against elitism and separation from the realities, lives, and aspirations of the broad mass of working people, as well as from the class struggle and from the fight against sexism, racism, and imperialism.

In our last editorial (JC 10/11), we set out what we thought genuine political practice included. The same applies to any cultural work that wishes to be considered politically significant. We said it should be:

- active—“an intervention in the world,”
- collective—“done in collaboration with others,”
- immediate—“involving face to face contact with others (outside the

group) and intervening in the world one lives in,”

- mass—“getting beyond the enclosed and self-confirming world of most intellectuals.”

Discussing his experience in a worker’s theatre, the great communist dramatist, Bertolt Brecht, once reported:

“I shall never forget how one worker looked at me when I answered his request to include something extra in a song about the USSR (“It must go in—what’s the point otherwise?”) by saying it would wreck the artistic form: he put his head on one side and smiled. At this polite smile a whole section of aesthetic collapsed. The workers were not afraid to teach us, or were they afraid to learn.”

What Brecht put his finger on, and what is not generally part of left cultural work today in the United States is the need for cultural workers to be in a position to be criticized by non-cultural workers. We need to have that as a goal and to do our work to make it a reality.

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